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Economic Affairs Interim Committee

64th Montana Legislature

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August 30, 2016

Waded Cruzado
President, Montana State University

Hand-delivered by Sen. Gordon Vance on behalf of the Economic Affairs Interim Committee

Dear President Cruzado:

For the past 7 years, over interims beginning in 2009-2010, the Economic Affairs Interim Committee (EAIC) has heard of problems with the Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory, located on Montana State University's campus and functioning as an agency of the Department of Livestock (Department). The Veterinary Diagnostic Lab has diligently addressed many of its problems, but the biggest problem of all is the need for a new facility that protects its employees and the integrity of its testing.

In the latest interim, the 2015-2016 EAIC learned that other labs, most of them situated on the MSU campus, are interested in forming a lab complex. The Department has indicated its interest in the Veterinary Diagnostic Lab being a part of that complex. The EAIC is writing you to urge Montana State University to be a friend to that process. Understanding that the university has various needs, the EAIC also sees that the Veterinary Diagnostic Lab provides a big service not only to the livestock industry but to public health and safety through its testing for brucellosis and various zoonotic diseases. In fact, in the 2015 Session, the Legislature recognized the public safety component of the Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory services in committing general funds to help cover the costs of zoonotic tests.

While hearing that the building housing the laboratory is in dire need of major renovation or outright replacement, the EAIC also has received the impression that MSU has assigned a low priority to modernizing the facility, has repeatedly delayed any efforts aimed at modernization or including a new lab in future building plans, and has shown little interest in retaining the laboratory on its campus.

The EAIC at its Aug. 30 meeting applauded the goal of a multi-lab complex housed on the MSU campus, where students could gain access to skilled technicians, gain hands-on experience for those interested in the new veterinary program, and explore potential jobs related to the MSU campus. Committee members also noted that many other cities in Montana might be interested in providing land or making land and infrastructure generally available if MSU is not interested in moving forward with a lab complex. The Veterinary Diagnostic Lab's importance to Montana citizens and attractive qualities to Montana communities cannot be overstated.

Recognizing that the development of a multi-lab complex might take time and not be a high priority for the 2017 session, the EAIC also maintains that the importance of a high-functioning Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory cannot be delayed for any appreciable time and that a priority needs to be established to recognize future action related to a multi-lab complex. Without setting a priority for the

2019 session, the current members of the EAIC--at least those around for the 2019 session--may see a lack of a priority from MSU as an indication to begin looking at other communities eligible for housing a multi-lab complex. We hope you see this priority setting as an opportunity to be forward-thinking.

By sending copies of this letter to the Board of Regents and the Commissioner of Higher Education, the EAIC is recognizing that Montana State University's position is one of many in the broader educational universe and that a new multi-lab complex would benefit any number of educational facilities. The EAIC believes that the laboratory is important, benefits all Montanans, and must modernize to meet the needs of the 21st century. The EAIC members look forward to a formal response from your office to this letter and what actions you plan to take in the immediate future if MSU is interested in retention of the Veterinary Diagnostic Lab and development of a lab complex on campus. If, conversely, MSU is not interested in furthering this multi-lab development, the EAIC wants to hear that, too. A response in either direction will be included in the EAIC's final report, due in November 2016.

Sincerely,

Rep. Ryan Lynch, EAIC Presiding Officer

Sen. Gordon Vance, EAIC Vice Presiding Officer

cc: Paul Tuss, chair, Board of Regents
Clayton Christian, Commissioner of Higher Education